

New PE Goal: Activities Good For a Lifetime

Emphasis Counters Boredom, Obesity

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Dance instructor Mat Guenther stretched horizontally, one arm behind him to lift his body upward as he sprang from his heels, spun for millisecond like a human pinwheel and landed gracefully in front of two dozen riveted students at the District's Thomson Elementary School.

"You have to jump and point your bellybutton to the ceiling," the wiry Guenther explained as he did the classic "swipe" step of break dancing, a sort of horizontal cartwheel. "Go up and turn over."

As the students followed Guenther's lead, physical education teacher Bobby Lewis seemed as awed as they with the instructor's agility. "All the body parts are being exercised -- nothing is left out," he mused. "It may hurt, but they enjoy this."

The after-school break dancing hour is part of an expanded curriculum established at Thomson this year. Across the region, schools are introducing unorthodox physical education programs as a way to get children -- as a group, prone to obesity from hours in front of television and computer screens -- to exercise.

"We want them to get off their butts," said Mary Marks, health and physical education coordinator for Fairfax County schools, where the exercise programs include circus juggling and rock climbing. "Children have systematically been taught how to be inactive, and we have to change that."

Lack of exercise, coupled with increased intake of fat and sugar, has led to an obesity epidemic among the nation's children, medical experts have warned. Today, 15 percent of U.S. children are considered obese -- which means they have a body mass index of 30 or more, calculated based on height and weight -- compared with 5 percent in the 1970s. That has been accompanied by an increase in childhood Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and sleep apnea.

Physical education teachers have been trying to thwart this trend. For the past decade, they have been constructing a "new PE" curriculum -- moving away from team sports in which many students could not compete or could not continue for life, said Mark Manross, executive director of PE Central, a national Web site that provides information for health and physical education teachers.

"Team sports made many people feel out of it," Manross said. "You had dodge ball, kickball, and if kids weren't picked, they didn't want to go to practice."

Now schools have introduced such baby boomer-influenced activities as yoga, rock climbing and mountain biking as well as popular cultural activities such as break dancing, in-line skating and Frisbee.

"The old PE wasn't working," said Deborah DeFranco, Arlington County's physical education supervisor. "We call it your father's PE class," she said, referring to the traditional jumping jacks, push-ups, sit-ups and running that bored all but the most committed athletes.

Even the popular team sports -- basketball, football and soccer -- have drawbacks, Manross said: They require a lot of people to participate and, therefore, a lot of organization. He said the purpose of the "new PE" is to get students to learn a sport or exercise that they can carry into adulthood.

That is the goal of Dennis Burstein, the Alexandria public schools' physical education curriculum specialist. The school system recently was awarded a half-million-dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Education for Burstein's proposed Project P.A.L. -- an exercise program that would teach students to select a physical activity for life.

This week, Burstein was at the rock-climbing wall orientation at Douglas MacArthur Elementary School, where PE teachers and students seemed enthralled with the new horizontal climbing wall with its colorful handholds.

Because most students take PE only twice a week for a half-hour or so, Burstein said, it's important that they learn an activity such as rock climbing that they can do outside of school. Trav Clark, 11, declared it far better than typical exercise.

"You're not repeating here -- like when you do pull-ups," Trav said.

And it seemed to be effective. "I can really feel it in my muscles," 10-year-old Allie Zickar said.

With the grant, Burstein said, the school also will introduce in-line skating and the wildly popular pedometers, which track how far a person walks each day.

At Montgomery County's Matsunaga Elementary School, physical education teacher Cindy Lins said pedometers have been a huge hit with her students.

"The kids love it because they have buttons that they can push and it gives them immediate feedback," Lins said. "They can . . . see that they went 1,800 steps and then set their own goals to take 300 more steps."

Many PE classes blend the old and the new. In Fairfax County, some elementary schools have offered a circus activity class in which kids learned not only traditional gymnastics -- tumbles and flips -- but also how to juggle and ride a unicycle, Marks said.

At Arlington County's Tuckahoe Elementary School, physical education teacher Bruce Keith gave third-graders hula hoops and had them move to dance routines such as the electric slide and the hustle.

In another room, Floyd Corkins's students did a type of push-up but with an unusual twist: While holding themselves up with one arm, they had to remove pegs from a puzzle with the other. Then they switched, using the other hand to replace the pegs. "You have to mix it up, because kids get bored after a while," Corkins said, adding that the new activities focus on individual performance rather than competition.

Student Katie Sondheim appreciated the variety. "I like PE because it is always something different," she said.

Physical education teachers acknowledge that they are competing with computers, television and junk food for students' time. They can't yet measure whether the new variety of programs will encourage students to keep moving after leaving school for the day and reverse the obesity epidemic.

But Tuckahoe student Sydney Hiller, 9, can give them hope.

"It's one of my favorite classes," she said. "If they have extra PE, I'll do it."

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